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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 IRAN RPO DUBAI 000007

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SUBJECT: IRANIAN REP'S VIEWS ON REGIONAL ASSYRIAN COMMUNITY

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RPO DUBAI 00000007 001.2 OF 002

CLASSIFIED BY: Jillian Burns, Director, Iran Regional Presence  
Office, Department of State.  
REASON: 1.4 (d)

11. (S//NF) Summary: IRPOffs met with the Assyrian Majles representative Yonathan Bet Kolia (strictly protect) February 122. Bet Kolia will lead a delegation of Iranian Assyrians to an Assyrian National Congress meeting March 24-25 in California. According to Bet Kolia, there have been no recent changes in the status of the Assyrian community in Iran, but he said the situation for Assyrians in Syria, Iraq, and Jordan is very poor. The MP indicated that during his upcoming planned visit to the US, he would likely meet with Congresswoman Anna Eshoo of the 14th district in California, who is of Assyrian descent. He added that when he spoke with some officials from the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (Ettela'at) about the possibility of parliamentary exchanges between Iran and the US, they were receptive and encouraging. End Summary.

12. (S//NF) IRPOffs met February 22 with the Assyrian representative (MP) in the Iranian Majles, Yonathan Bet Kolia. (Note: Five seats in the Iranian Majles are designated specifically for religious minorities. There is one representative each from the Zoroastrian, Jewish, and Assyrian communities, and two from the Armenian community. End Note.) The Assyrian MP was in Dubai to apply for a US visa in order to attend a meeting of the Assyrian National Congress, an organization that brings together representatives from Assyrian communities across the world. He has attended similar meetings in the US in the past. The meeting will be held in Ceres, California on March 24-25. Traveling with Mr. Bet Kolia will be nine other members of the Assyrian community in Iran, representing various Assyrian organizations inside the country. The MP spoke about the current status of the Assyrian community in Iran, and also commented on status of Assyrians in Iraq, Syria, and Jordan.

Assyrians in Iran  
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13. (S//NF) Prior to the Iranian revolution there were 70,000-80,000 Assyrians in Iran, the MP said. (Note: Assyrians in Iran refer to their language as Assyrian, and describe

themselves as Assyrian, rather than Chaldean, Syriac, or other similar names that have been used to describe this ancient Christian community. This Iranian delegation to the Assyrian National Congress plans to promote the singular use of the term "Assyrian" to describe the members of this community worldwide. End Note.) During the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq war, many Assyrians fled the country, particularly families with sons who were eligible for conscription. Families sent their sons to the West to avoid frontline military service, and then joined them as soon as they could. Currently, there are no more than 30,000 Assyrians in Iran, the MP estimated. Before the Khatami presidency, religious minorities did not receive government funding on a regular basis. Employers regularly discriminated against non-Muslims, calling for "Muslims only" in job advertisements, despite the constitution providing for equal employment rights to all recognized religious minorities. (Note: According to the Iranian constitution, Zoroastrian, Jewish, and Christian Iranians are the only recognized religious minorities. End Note.) When discrimination in the employment sector was brought to Khatami's attention the practice stopped, the MP said. Furthermore, a budget for religious minorities (providing funding for schools, cultural centers, sports etc.) was made into a necessary line-item in the government budget, and it would require an additional law to remove it. Religious minorities (as a group, not individually) have received approximately \$2 million annually from the government since the Khatami years, according to the MP.

¶4. (S//NF) The Khatami presidency saw many improvements for recognized religious minorities in Iran, and Ahmadinejad has kept the same policies in place, the Assyrian MP noted. However, the Majles is attempting to decrease the budget for religious minorities for the upcoming year. The budget bill is still under discussion in the Majles, so the outcome is not yet clear. (Note: The Iranian year 1386 begins March 21, 2007. End Note.) The MP inferred that the attempted decrease in the budget is a result of Iran's overall economic woes, rather than an action targeted against religious minorities. Mr. Bet Kolia is attempting to have the budget for the Assyrian community

RPO DUBAI 00000007 002.2 OF 002

separated from the overall budget for religious minorities in the upcoming year. The Assyrian community has separate schools but opens them to children of all religions. They are permitted to teach classes in the Assyrian language, and also write their own textbooks, which the government then prints for them. The government pays the salaries of the teachers, but the teachers are Assyrian. The situation for Assyrians inside Iran is fairly good, particularly in comparison with the status of Assyrian community in nearby countries, the MP commented.

#### Assyrians in Iraq

¶5. (S//NF) The Iranian Assyrian MP estimated that 250,000 Assyrians have fled Iraq since the beginning of the war in 2003, also estimating a high number (NFI) of internally displaced persons among Assyrians in Iraq. The MP related one egregious case of a young Assyrian woman who was kidnapped for ransom. He claimed she was beheaded when the family was unable to pay the ransom and her boiled head returned to the family. He described the current situation for Assyrians in Iraq as very poor. The MP claimed there is a movement to promote the creation of an Assyrian homeland, to be located most likely in Nineveh province in Iraq, and hinted at desire for third country support. The MP inferred it is not a separatist movement but one that seeks the creation of an autonomous region within the larger country. He stressed that under no circumstances could the Assyrian homeland be under the control of the Kurds. The Assyrians, he said, hold the Kurds responsible for a reported massacre of Assyrians in Iraq in 1933. He also mentioned the assassination decades ago of the Patriarch of the Assyrian Church, although it was unclear whether he was insinuating Kurdish involvement in that assassination.

#### Assyrians in Jordan and Syria

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¶6. (S//NF) The MP stated that there are an estimated 120,000 Assyrian refugees from Iraq in Jordan. He claimed Assyrian refugees in Jordan face extreme poverty, and a number of women and children are forced into prostitution in order to feed their families. The Assyrian community in Syria, which the MP estimated at 60,000, faces government restrictions on their freedom to congregate. When the MP approached Assyrian organizations in Syria to suggest that the larger Assyrian community hold a conference in Syria, they said it wasn't possible. When he offered to go to the Syrian Embassy in Iran to request permission, they pleaded with him not to do so. The MP also gave an estimate of the Assyrian community in Turkey as approximately 40,000. He also said that SARG claims after the film "Passion of the Christ" that it would help support promotion of the Assyrian language came to nothing.

Parliamentary Exchanges?  
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¶7. (S//NF) The Assyrian Majles representative indicated that during his upcoming planned visit to the US, he would likely meet with Congresswoman Anna Eshoo, from California's 14th congressional district, who is of Assyrian descent. (Note: This is likely not their first meeting. End Note.) The MP talked about that meeting in a strictly Assyrian context, but also discussed the broader idea of contact between members of the Iranian and US legislatures. The MP said that he spoke with officials from the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (Ettela'at) prior to leaving the country to apply for a US visa, and mentioned the possibility of parliamentary exchanges between Iran and US. The officials were receptive to the idea, he said, and encouraged him to pursue it.

¶8. (S//NF) Comment: MP Bet Kolia underscored that the situation for Assyrians in Iran is largely unchanged and superior to that in Iraq or Syria, where old communities exist, and in Jordan, among the Iraqi refugee community. While his view may be tempered by his official status, we have not seen any reports that suggest a deterioration of Assyrians' status in Iran. IRPOff broached with him the idea of meeting DRL officials while in the US; he took contact information but made no commitments.  
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